



Congressional Update
By Roxanne Perugino
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The House abruptly adjourned on June 22 amid chaos when Democrats staged a sit-in on the House floor disrupting proceedings. Led by civil rights icon Representative John Lewis (D-Georgia), who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, the sit-in was called after demands by Democrats for a vote on gun legislation were ignored. Lewis and other Democrats blatantly violated House rules by shouting down Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) with chants and songs. Finally, in the early hours of the morning Republicans passed the Zika legislation and scurried out of town. The House will return on July 5. House Minority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Maryland), said Democrats will continue their demand for a vote on gun legislation when the House returns.

I. Palestinians

On June 20, Representative Betty McCollum (D-Minnesota) and 19 Democratic colleagues sent a [letter](#) to President Obama urging him to appoint a special envoy for Palestinian youth to monitor the Israeli government's violation of Palestinian children's human rights. The letter also calls on the State Department to elevate the human rights of Palestinian children to a priority status in the US-Israeli bilateral relationship and the ongoing US engagement with the Palestinian Authority (PA).

This is not the first letter McCollum has sent concerning Palestinian children. In June, 2015 McCollum sent a [letter](#) to Secretary of State John Kerry concerning the detention of Palestinian children by the Israeli military. That letter also urged the State Department to elevate the human rights of Palestinian children to a priority status in the US-Israeli bilateral relationship. The letter stated the expectation that the State Department would address the status of Israel's military detention system's treatment of Palestinian children in its annual Human Rights Report.

II. Israel

US Military Assistance to Israel. On June 22, Senators Marco Rubio (R-Florida), Chris Coons (D-Delaware), Kelly Ayotte (R-New Hampshire), Bob Casey (D-Pennsylvania), Mark Kirk (R-Illinois), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York), Johnny Isakson (R-Georgia), Cory Booker (D-New Jersey), David Perdue (R-Georgia), Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), Tom Cotton (R-Arkansas), Gary Peters (D-Michigan), Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Mark Warner (D-Virginia), John Boozman (R-Arkansas), John Cornyn (R-Texas) and Pat Roberts (R-Kansas), introduced **SRes508, a resolution expressing support for the expeditious consideration and finalization of a new, robust, and long-term Memorandum of Understanding on military assistance to Israel between the United States Government and the Government of Israel.** The resolution has been referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC).



III. Tunisia

Assistance for Tunisia. On June 22, Representatives David Schweikert (R-Arizona) and Alcee Hastings (D-Florida), introduced **HR5568, a bill to authorize assistance for the Government of Tunisia.** The bill has been referred to the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC).

There is strong support for Tunisia from a number of members who are disappointed with the FY 2017 aid levels proposed by the Obama Administration. These members believe that with US help, Tunisia's revolution and path to democracy can succeed. At a recent HFAC hearing Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida) suggested to witnesses that unobligated funds currently in the pipeline for Egypt be reprogrammed to Tunisia.

IV. Syria/Refugees

Representatives Seth Moulton (D-Massachusetts), David Cicilline (D-Rhode Island) and Bill Pascrell (D-New Jersey) and 70 co-signers sent a [letter](#) to Secretary of State John Kerry urging him to meet the administration's stated goal of resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees in the US before October.

The State Department has settled only 2,805 Syrian refugees during the first eight months of the fiscal year, according to the letter, which was released on World Refugee Day. The letter is a response to Republican efforts to significantly slow the number of refugees resettled in the US following the terrorist attack in Orlando, Florida carried out by Omar Mateen.

Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons. On March 20, Representatives Ted Lieu (D-Washington), Eliot Engel (D-New York), David Cicilline (D-Rhode Island), Earl Blumenauer (D-Oregon), Alcee Hastings (D-Florida), Juan Vargas (D-California), Joe Crowley (D-New York), Ruben Gallago (D-Arizona), Adam Schiff (D-California), Zoe Lofgren (D-California) and Betty McCollum (D-Minnesota) introduced **HRes792, reaffirming the United States commitment to the protection of refugees and displaced persons.** The resolution has been referred to the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

V. Status of National Defense Authorization Act

The House and Senate Armed Services Committees are anxious to meet in a joint House-Senate conference to negotiate a compromise on the two versions of the fiscal 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. However, there are numerous differences between the House and Senate-passed bills, which means it could take till early fall before all differences are ironed out. While conference negotiations will likely stretch into fall, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain (R-Arizona) expressed confidence the must-pass bill will get done. President Obama has threatened to veto the defense bill.

VI. Hearings This Week

Ideology of ISIS: ISIL - On June 21, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs held a hearing to examine the ideology of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). As Congress and the administration continue to grapple with a plan to defeat the



terrorist group. Tuesday's hearing provided members an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the ideological forces that drive these extremists toward such heinous and awful violence. To this end, testimony was received from four witnesses, including: Hassan Hassan, a resident fellow with the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy; Dr. Tarek Elgawhary, Director of Religious Studies Programs at the World Organization for Resource Development and Education; Subhi Nahas, an activist for the LGBT community and board chairman of the Spectra Project; and human rights activist Nadia Murad. Copies of their testimony can be found [here](#).

Together, these witnesses comprised a rather comprehensive panel of academic and policy expertise, as well as first-hand knowledge of the abuse and horrors suffered by religious and sexual minorities in Iraq and Syria. It was on the latter, however, and the courageous testimony of Ms. Murad, a Yazidi sex slave survivor, that had the rapt attention of everyone in the room. With her translator at her side, Ms. Murad detailed for the committee the horrible atrocities committed against her and her fellow Yazidis. As ISIL swept across Iraq in 2014 and into Yazidi territory, the historically peaceful religious minority was unable to protect itself against the brutal extremists. Thousands of Yazidis were slaughtered, including 3,000 men, women and children in a mere two weeks. Among those killed were Ms. Murad's own mother and six brothers. And though her life was spared, Ms. Murad was taken to Mosul where she would be sold as a sex slave, a fate she described as "lucky" given her relative age; captured at 19, she considered herself better able to mentally cope with her horrid experience, compared to, for instance, the nine-year-old Yazidi girls also sold into slavery.

But with the help of a local Iraqi family and a fake "Islamic State" ID, Ms. Murad ultimately escaped her captives. She is now using her freedom to address governments across the world about the tragic plight of her people and the need for Muslim leaders to forcefully speak out against ISIL and its perversion of Islam. And her plea for Congress? To officially label the murdering of Yazidis by ISIL as "genocide" and to do all in its power to erase the extremist group from existence.

Regarding this last objective, however, it was Mr. Hassan who offered a less-than-inspiring assessment of the battle against ISIL. Notwithstanding recent military gains against ISIL strongholds in both Iraq and Syria, Hassan was critical of the policies underlying the overall campaign. In his view, current US policy is only strengthening the terrorist organization. Not only is the immigration issue being mishandled here in the US, but in the Middle East, too much emphasis has been placed on military victories and not enough on shifting the regional debate within political, social and religious circles. He argued the US must do more to sway public opinion – particularly among Sunnis - and galvanize local populations against ISIL and its sympathizers; this is a process that is indeed undermined when US forces fight alongside groups that have traditionally been treated with suspicion by locals (e.g. the PKK-linked YPG). To ultimately defeat ISIL, then, the war must not be framed as a sectarian struggle, but rather a war by the terrorist group against all of humanity, Sunnis included.

Dr. Elgawhary reaffirmed this need to alter the narrative. To the Muslim world, he said, scholars must speak out against ISIL and advocate for certain fundamental aspects of modernity, like democracy. And while Dr. Elgawhary has done his best to publicly condemn the extremist group and decry their very existence as antithetical to Islam, he agreed that Arab governments and



Muslim leaders must do more on this front. But to the committee the message was clear. Here at home, the rhetoric must change as well, lest the fight against ISIL be prolonged by further marginalizing “normative” Muslims, who, according to Elgawhary, ought to be the US’s biggest ally.

Ambassadorial Nomination: On June 22, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) held hearing to examine the nominations of Lawrence R. [Silverman](#) to be US Ambassador to Kuwait, and Douglas A. [Silliman](#) to be US Ambassador to Iraq.

The hearing was very brief, owing to a heavy legislative schedule. Questions by members were kept to a minimum. Both Silverman and Silliman were warmly received by the panel. Confirmation hearings before the SFRC have become routine in recent years. Nominees meet individually and privately with committee members prior to their appearance to discuss issues and answer questions. As a result the confirmation hearings tend to be slightly more than perfunctory.

Silverman told the panel, that if confirmed, he will work close with Congress to sustain and enhance the “close, productive” and mutually beneficial relationship with Kuwait. The US-Kuwait partnership is a cornerstone of US national security interests in the area and helps the US find solutions to destabilizing regional conflicts, combat extremism and terrorism, promote commerce, advance cooperation on global issues. In response to a question on eliminating human trafficking by Senator Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), Silverman said some progress is being made in Kuwait and he pledged to do all he can to combat human trafficking in that country.

Cardin also questioned Silliman about the situation in Iraq. Silliman said if confirmed, he will continue to help the Iraqi Government combat ISIL. Silliman also will work for political reconciliation and improved Iraqi relations in the region and around the world. Security assistance can only take Iraq so far: reconciliation will be needed to heal the country.

The SFRC is expected to approve the nominees shortly. Following committee approval, the nominees will be confirmed by the full Senate.

Terrorist Financing: On June 23, the House Financial Services Task Force to Investigate Terrorism Financing held a hearing titled “The Next Terrorist Financiers: Stopping Them Before They Start.” Testimony was received from Juan C. [Zarate](#), Senior Adviser, Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Chairman and Senior Counselor, Center on Sanctions and Illicit Finance, Foundation for Defense of Democracies; Professor Jimmy [Gurule](#), Notre Dame Law School; John [Cassara](#), former US Intelligence Office and Treasury Special Agent; Professor Celina B. [Realuyo](#), National Defense University; and Douglas [Farah](#), President, IBI Consultants and Senior Non-Resident Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The hearing was held to summarize the two-year efforts of the Task Force to investigate the methods, locations, organizations, and financial mechanisms that terrorists utilize to fund their activities. The witnesses recapped the history and current state of terror finance and methods used to combat it, including the methods governments will need to change their efforts as new



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illicit finance threats emerge. The witnesses also discussed actions Congress should consider to enable USG departments and agencies to better undertake future anti-terror finance efforts.